

The Alaska Poll®



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STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT SYSTEM'S RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

October 2003

Prepared for

Children's Justice Act Task Force

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Methodology



Overview

During the period September 16, 2003 through October 3, 2003, eighty (n=80) professionals involved in aspects of the State of Alaska's cases of child sexual abuse were personally contacted via telephone by professional interviewing employees of the Dittman Research Corporation of Alaska. The views and opinions of these professionals, located throughout the state, were recorded on a strictly confidential basis.

Research Design

Respondents were contacted from a list provided by the Children's Justice Act Task Force. Those contacted were previously notified of the survey and its purpose by the CJA coordinator.

Sample Selection

Eighty people on the provided list were contacted and agreed to participate in the survey. The distribution of professions among the group is as follows:

Groups	Number	Percentage
Attorney General's office	5	6.3%
CAC Advocates	5	6.3%
Child Protection Services	4	4.9%
Health Care Providers	5	6.3%
Indian Child Welfare Act	5	6.3%
Mental Health	8	10.0%
Office of Public Advocacy/ Private GAL/CASA	8	10.0%
Parent Advocates	1	1.2%
Parents/Victims	3	3.7%
Public Defender	10	12.5%
Special Education/ Developmental Disabilities	2	2.5%
Tribal Attorneys/Advocates	3	3.7%
Law Enforcement	10	12.5%
Judge	5	6.3%
DA's Office	6	7.5%
Total	80	100%

Additional crosstabulations were run, which classified respondents into three broad categories based on professional role: Administrative, Investigative, and Judicial.

Administrative	Number	Percentage
Health Care Providers	5	6.3%
Indian Child Welfare Act	5	6.3%
Mental Health	8	10.0%
Parent Advocates	1	1.2%
Special Education/ Developmental Disabilities	2	2.5%
Total	21	26.3%
Investigative		
CAC Advocates	5	6.3%
Child Protection Services	4	4.9%
Law Enforcement	10	12.5%
Parents/Victims	3	3.7%
Total	22	27.4%
Judicial		
Attorney General's office	5	6.3%
DA's Office	6	7.5%
Judge	5	6.3%
Office of Public Advocacy/ Private GAL/CASA	8	10.0%
Public Defender	10	12.5%
Tribal Attorneys/Advocates	3	3.7%
Total	37	46.3%

Processing the Data

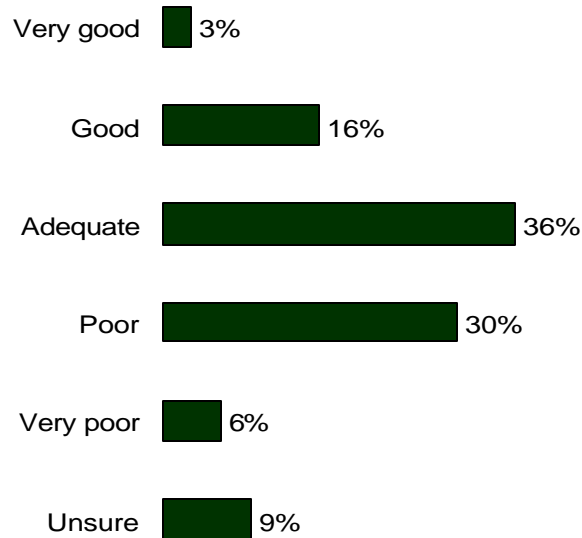
Dittman Research employees completed coding, editing, data entry and verification, while data processing was completed through the in-house Dittman Research Corporation computer system featuring the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. The SPSS program is one of the most sophisticated research-oriented data processing and analytical systems available, and is designed specifically for the processing and analysis of survey research data.

II Findings



The largest number of respondents overall believe Alaska is doing an “adequate” to “poor” job of fulfilling the Task Force’s mission of “*reducing child sexual abuse by improving the system’s response to child maltreatment.*”

Question: *The mission of the Children’s Justice Act Task Force is: “To reduce child sexual abuse by improving the system’s response to child maltreatment.” How would you rate the overall job Alaska is doing in fulfilling the Children’s Justice Act’s mission -- would you say it is doing a very good, good, adequate, poor or very poor job at this time?*



Judicial and Administrative respondents are most likely to feel the State is doing a “poor” or “very poor” job, while Investigative respondents report a little more optimism...

Professional role	Good/very good	Adequate	Poor/very poor
Judicial	14%	32%	40%
Administrative	19%	38%	38%
Investigative	28%	41%	28%

Respondents who believe the system's response is "adequate" to "very good" generally report seeing improvement, particularly in terms of "*cooperation among responding agencies*." On the other hand, respondents who believe there is room for improvement generally point to "*understaffing*," "*poor victim support*," "*poor prosecution*," and "*poor coordination*."¹

Question: ***Why is that... what's the main reason you would give the system a (answer from Q.1) rating?***

- 25% Working together better; there is improvement
- 23% Understaffed, lack of resources
- 18% Poor victim support, poor interviewing techniques
- 16% Poor prosecution, slow, not enough convictions
- 12% Poor collaboration/coordination, slow, unqualified peers
- 5% Prevention not working, more cases now

Judicial respondents are most likely to fault "*prosecution*" and "*prevention*" while Administrative respondents see "*improved cooperation*," but still problems with "*staffing*" and "*victim support*." Investigative respondents also see some "*improvements in cooperation*," but just as many see problems in this area.

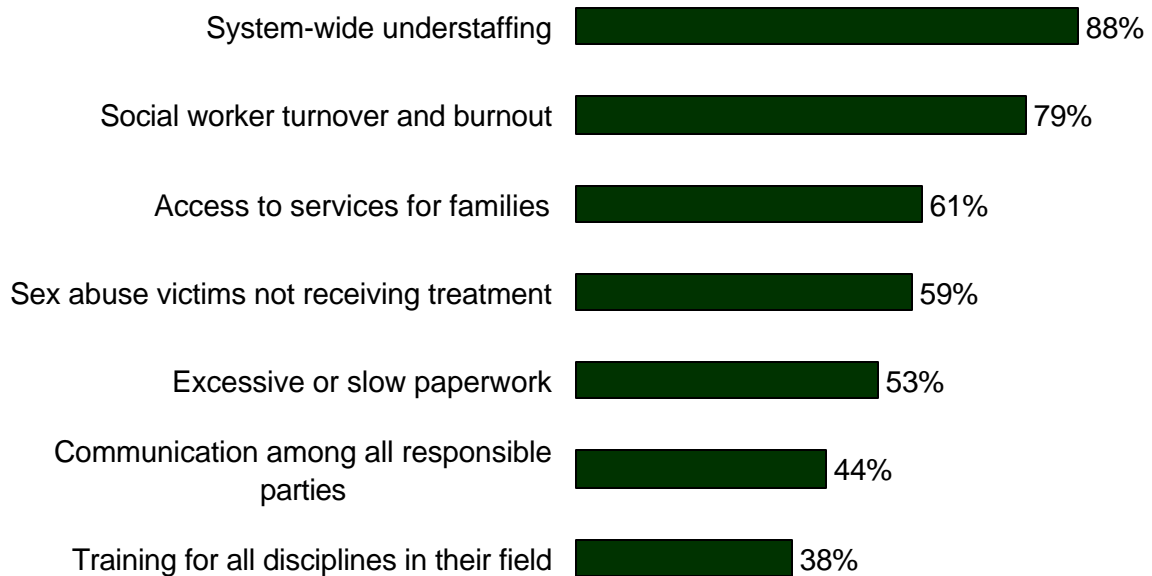
Professional role	Improvement, cooperation	Poor collaboration	Lack of resources, staff	Poor victim support	Poor prosecution	Poor prevention
Judicial	19%	3%	25%	19%	22%	13%
Administrative	30%	10%	30%	25%	5%	0%
Investigative	29%	29%	14%	10%	19%	0%

¹ See "Verbatim Comments" for complete listing of responses, Section III.

Respondents report “*system-wide understaffing*” (88%) is the most serious problem affecting the state’s handling of child sexual abuse cases, which is followed closely by “*social worker turnover and burnout*” (79%). Nearly six out of ten respondents (59%) consider “*sex abuse victims not receiving treatment*” a serious problem, while a slightly smaller number consider “*excessive paperwork*” (53%) and “*communication among agencies*” (44%) serious problems.

Question: *What is your opinion regarding the following aspects of dealing with sexual abuse and maltreatment of children in Alaska? Please tell me whether you feel each one is a very serious problem, just a mild problem, or not a problem at all?*

(% "Very serious problem")



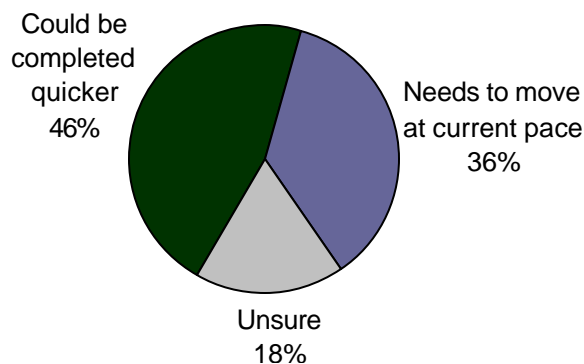
Overall, there tends to be “rank order” agreement among the three professional categories, however, Administrative respondents are consistently more likely to believe all problem areas are more serious.

(% “Very serious problem”)

Professional role	Under-staffing	Burnout	Access	No treatment	Paperwork	Communication	Training
Judicial	81%	73%	62%	54%	46%	32%	32%
Administrative	100%	90%	76%	76%	62%	67%	48%
Investigative	86%	77%	45%	50%	55%	41%	36%

Approximately half of all respondents (46%) report they believe that the process for dealing with child sexual abuse cases could be completed more quickly...

Question: *Could the paperwork and other elements of the process for dealing with child sexual abuse cases be completed quicker, or does it need to move at the current pace in order to protect the rights of everyone involved?*



...and all three professional categories tend to agree, but Investigative respondents are more supportive of the current pace.

Profession role	Quicker	Current Pace	Unsure
Judicial	43%	35%	22%
Administrative	52%	29%	19%
Investigative	45%	45%	9%

Respondents suggest a variety of areas in which they would like further training, with most of the training they suggest calculated to improve their interaction with victims ("*training in up-to-date resource*," "*victim assistance*," "*interviewing*").

Question: *As far as training is concerned, what training specifically would be most helpful to you in your job when working with child sexual abuse cases?*

- 24% Up-to-date resources, cross-training
- 23% Victim assistance, recognizing and responding to problem
- 18% Interviewing (including forensic) and investigating techniques
- 11% Legal issues, court process, what not to do
- 9% Misc. (clinical/health issues, Native culture)
- 16% Unsure

It's important to note the general absence of a "know it all" attitude – the different professional areas tend to want more training in their general areas of expertise, i.e., Judicial in "*legal issues*," Investigative in "*interviewing*."

Profession role	Up-to-date Resources	Victim Assistance	Interviewing	Legal Issues
Judicial	14%	27%	16%	16%
Administrative	43%	24%	5%	10%
Investigative	23%	14%	32%	5%

When asked what type of training their colleagues need, *"interviewing and investigative techniques"* jumped to the top of the list, but overall, there seems to be common agreement regarding training needs for themselves and colleagues.

Question: *And what about other professionals you work with...in your opinion, what other additional training could be offered that would help some of your colleagues in working with child sexual abuse cases?*

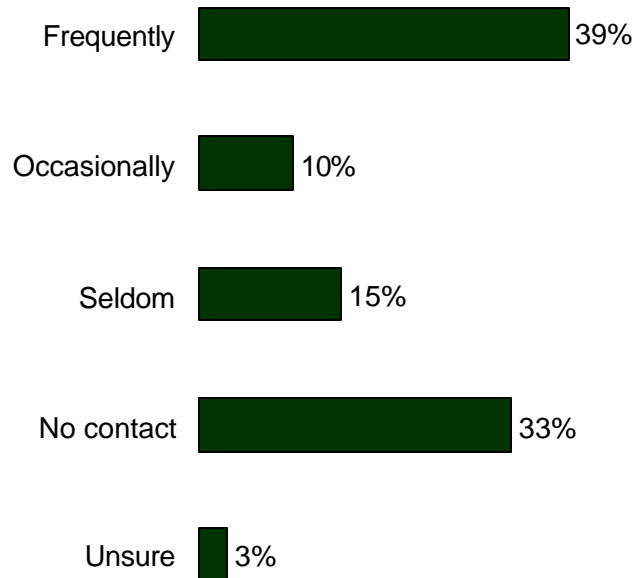
- 31% Interviewing (including forensic) and investigating techniques
- 26% Up-to-date resources, cross-training, better training
- 23% Victim assistance, skills in recognizing and responding to problem
- 9% Legal issues, court process, what not to do
- 8% Misc. (clinical/health issues, Native ways)
- 4% Unsure

In addition to the common agreement that more training in *"interviewing"* would be helpful, Judicial respondents believe their colleagues could use additional training in *"victim assistance,"* while Administrative and Investigative respondents see a greater need for more training and familiarity with *"up-to-date resources."*

Profession role	Interviewing	Up-to-date resources	Victim Assistance	Legal Issues
Judicial	35%	16%	30%	11%
Administrative	24%	38%	19%	5%
Investigative	32%	32%	14%	9%

Approximately two out of five respondents reported “frequent” contact with CACs.

Question: *Currently there are six CACs or Child Advocacy Centers in Alaska. How often have you been in contact with a CAC...?*

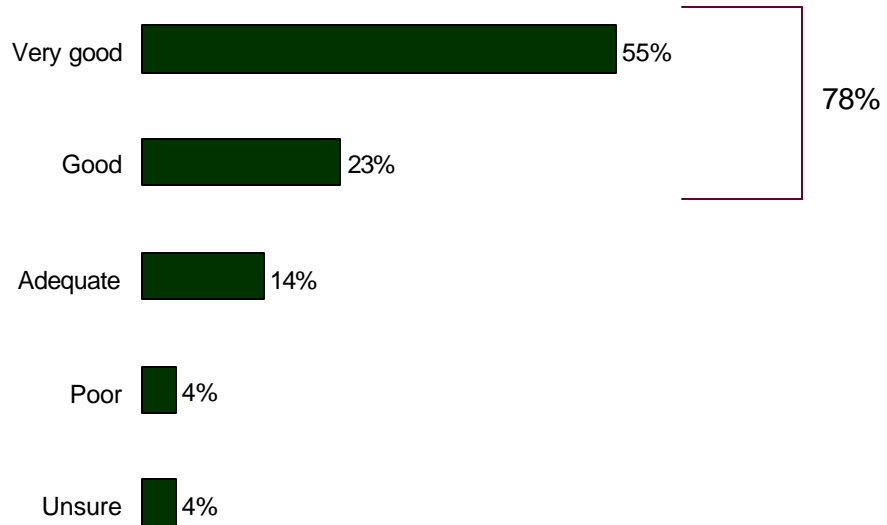


However, there is a major difference based on professional category with Judicial respondents least likely to report any contact with a CAC...

Profession role	Frequently	Occasionally	Seldom	No contact
Judicial	27%	16%	16%	41%
Administrative	48%	5%	24%	24%
Investigative	50%	5%	5%	32%

It seems evident that contact should be encouraged -- of those who have been in contact with a CAC, nearly eight out of ten (78%) characterize their experience as "very good" or "good"...

Question: *Overall, how would you rate your experience with that CAC, would you say you've had a...*



...and this includes strongly positive experience ratings in all three professional categories. (Asked of respondents reporting CAC contact).

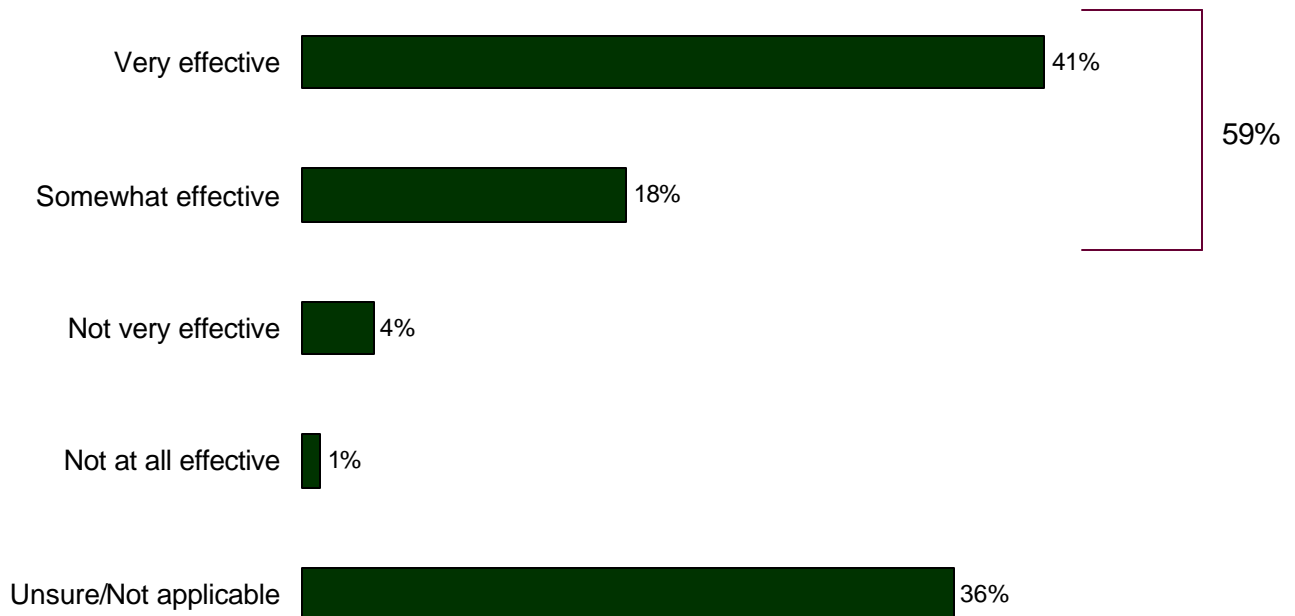
Question: *...how would you rate...?*

(% "Good/very good")

Judicial	73%
Administrative	81%
Investigative	84%

Even without personal experience, most respondents consider CACs to be effective in dealing with child sexual abuse.

Question: *Generally speaking, how effective are the new Child Advocacy Centers or CACs in dealing with child sexual abuse cases?*



And these overall perceptions will undoubtedly increase as Judicial respondents have more experience with the CACs.

Question: *...how effective are...CACs...?*

(% "Very effective")

Judicial	24%
Administrative	48%
Investigative	64%

Respondents believe several issues prevent child sexual abuse cases from going to trial more often, with “*reluctance to put a child on the stand*” leading the list, followed by “*reluctance of prosecution*” to take on cases.²

Question ***In your opinion, what is the one main issue or concern that prevents child sexual abuse cases from going to trial more often***

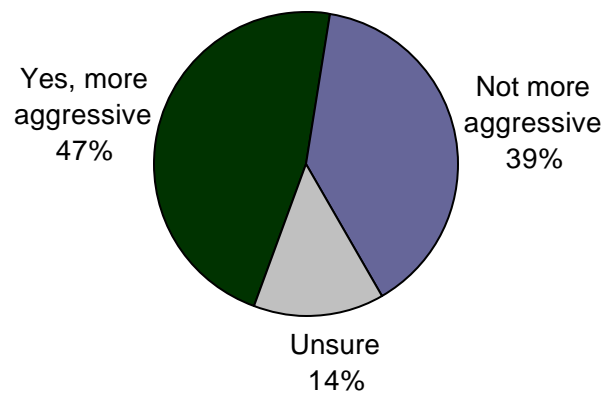
24% Reluctance to put a child on the stand
 19% Prosecutorial reluctance (vol.)
 16% Lack of physical evidence
 9% No confession
 5% Child/parents fear (vol.)
 21% All of the above (vol.)
 6% Unsure

Professional role	Reluctance to put child	Reluctance of prosecutors	Lack of evidence	No Confession	Child/parents fear
Judicial	30%	16%	11%	8%	3%
Administrative	24%	14%	19%	0%	10%
Investigative	14%	27%	23%	18%	5%

² “Prosecutorial reluctance” was a volunteered response in addition to choices offered. If it had been included within the original response options, there’s a good chance its relative ranking would be higher. It’s recommended that future research should include this option.

Despite the perceived sense of reluctance to put abused children on the stand, a slightly larger number of respondents believe the system should more aggressively prosecute suspected offenders in this manner and/or by going to trial without a confession or physical evidence.

Question: *Generally speaking, do you believe the system should be more aggressively prosecuting suspected offenders by putting children on the stand more and going to trial without a confession or physical evidence, or not?*



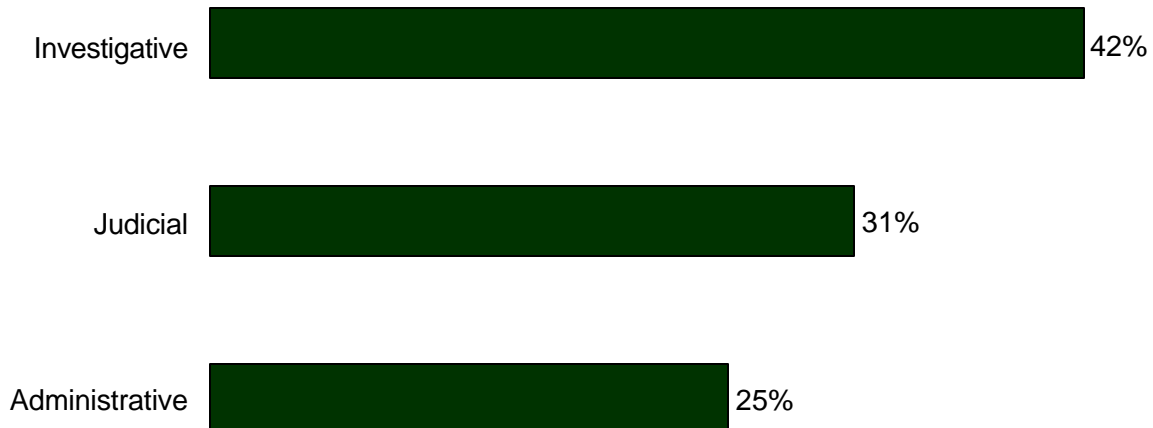
This view is most strongly recommended by Administrative respondents, while Judicial respondents are least supportive, and Investigative respondents are in-between.

Profession role	More aggressive	Not more aggressive	Unsure
Judicial	30%	51%	19%
Administrative	76%	14%	10%
Investigative	50%	41%	9%

Overall, combined respondents rate Investigative services, such as those offered by Child Protection Services, law enforcement, and CACs, most highly. Judicial services (including judges, attorneys, investigators, guardians ad litem, and CASAs), and Administrative areas (including mental health, medical, tribal, and special needs services), are less likely to be rated "good/very good."

Question: *Please rate the following areas regarding how well they deliver services to individuals and families in need of assistance in dealing with child sexual abuse.*

(% "Good/very good")



And in summary, it's important to note a healthy degree of independence and thoughtful self-evaluation – Investigative services are most likely to receive highest "good/very good" ratings from all three respondent categories, while Administrative respondents rate themselves a little lower than the other service areas.

(% "Good/very good")

Profession role	Investigative services	Judicial services	Administrative services
Judicial	40%	32%	22%
Administrative	34%	29%	24%
Investigative	50%	27%	32%

III

Verbatim Comments



IV Crosstabulations

